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ABSTRACT

Different writing voices are linked to early adult developmental issues that are gender-related. Research by Donald Graves has shown that gender affects topic choice in girls' and boys' writing as early as age seven. Adult developmental theories provide frames for looking at the growth potential of writers and locating gender-related issues. The work of Erik Erikson suggests that identity is the main concern of most college-age students. Centering workshop discussions, therefore, in a composition class not only on a writing problem but also on a life-stage experience involves more students and encourages higher level thinking. In addition, William Perry's schema of intellectual development used in a writing course challenges the students to examine their own thinking processes. An examination of the differences in choice of topics between men and women reveals that men tend to write about abstract topics, the ethic of rights for instance, whereas women tend to write about more personal topics, such as relationships with others. Nona Lyons's research suggests that male students describe themselves in terms that are separate and objective, while females describe themselves in terms of connectedness. If writing assignments are predominantly about personal experiences then male voices will not be heard at their best, and no voices should be left unheard. (SRT)

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Lost Voices

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CS 209858

Elizabeth Chiseri-Strater March, 1986

Lost Voices

I have just read through my first batch of student papers for the term. Even though the assignment is an open one, the voices are familiar to me. Steve's paper called "The Circle" begins:

"Society is a permeable circle, and within it lies the great majority of people. Just outside of that lies another, inexorable circle, and between the two circles float those select few unsatisfied with the false freedom the inner circle offers. Many of those few struggle to escape even the outter circle. And among those I find myself; for to be encircled is to be unfree, and to be unfree is to be spiritually, dead."

I sigh my most profound existential sigh and read Debbie's paper about her relationship with her Dad:

"I could always talk to my mom; she is a great listener and understands why I do things. But my dad, he is a different story. When I was a child I was terrified of him.. He is a very hard-working intense man--a quality I have grown to respect. Since I have been at college the only letters I have received from him have been dicated, and typed by his secretary. It used to hurt when I got to the end of the letter and even" love Dad" was typed in."

I wonder why Debbie's and Steve's voices sound so different yet so familiar at the same time. I begin to doubt my sanity at having taught Freshman composition for fifteen years. When I began teaching, I sat on my long hair, wore real Frye boots and smoked cigars in class. Now I've turned into a New England schoolmarm who has "read it all."

Vygotsky writes: "We must outgrow our current selves in order to learn." I'd like to focus today on how adult development models have helped me identify some gender-related issues in teaching writing as well as in evaluating it. I'd like to show how these very different writing voices--Debbie's and Steve's--are linked to early adult developmental issues which are, in turn, gender-related.

Vygotsky's quotation suggests that teachers as well as students must grow out of their current selves in order to move forward. As composition teachers, we have accepted that students' entire social, historical, cultural, and language matrix may affect their texts. Reader-response criticism has afforded us an appreciation of the richness and diversity of our students' discourse as well as our own readings of that

discourse.. With all this support from the fields of literary criticism, from semiotics, from cognitive psychology and linguistics, and from the field of rhetoric, you may ask how can we need yet another frame for vieving the writing of our students? My answer is that at the college level we are ignoring one of the most potentent determinants in writing differences---that of gender, a difference which has been documented by researcher Donald Graves as affecting topic choice in girls and boys writing as early as age seven. I'd like to argue that Models of adult development inform us that issues of gender contribute all our lives to the ways we respond and shape our worlds. And that We might expect that men and women would explore through writing very different topics and concerns.

In suggesting a closer look at adult developmental theorists, I am not proposing a model of writing development demarcating students' growth, which will translate into lock-step stages of rhetorical maturity or whatever term is now popular. But rather that adult developmental theories are frames for of looking at the growth potential of writers and possibly of locating some gender-related issues. Just as teachers at the other end of the scale are familiar with the work of child developmentalists--Gessell, Piaget, Montessori, Brazelton, and Fraiberg, college level teachers might consider how the work in the field of adult development can inform their own ways of looking at student growth.

There are a number of theorists who offer templates of adult growth which allow a writing teacher to distinguish the kinds of issues colleges students are most concerned with, issues which help a teacher hear the distinctions between Debbie's conflicts and those of Steve. As an overall exploration of the pycho-social problems of young adulthood, the work of psychoanalyst Erick Erikson on identity development suggests that "identity" <u>is</u> the central issue for most all college students. Erikson describes the college years as a kind of " moratorium " or a "sanctioned period of delay" where males and females experiment with possible identifications.

What Erikson's work has meant for me as a composition instructor, aside from a better understanding of the misused and overpopularized term "identity crisis", is a way of organizing my student workshops to include what I call the "lost voices" in my class.

I tried re-structuring my whole group peer workshops around papers which addressed issues of indentity. My previous criteria for selecting a paper to share with the whole class was that it display some writing problem common to the group. I still select a paper which lends itself to working with a specific writing topic but as well I've consciously added another consideration for workshop papers: that, if possible, they address a life-stage experience. If one of my goals in a workshop setting is to

involve as many students as possible in the discussion, it makes sense to present a paper which can draw upon the issues relevant to the entire class. For example, a paper about joining a cult opened the question of why young people are attracted to clubs, sects, and groups. The paper itself was not the best but the class discussion around how to revise it involved a very high level of critical thinking about the issues presented in the paper, about the many points of view it could include. Many of the class contributions came from what I might call "other voices"--those students who are not the most successful writers or even critics but who certainly share the same life-stage issues. Since the selection of a workshop paper is often the teacher's choice I now look for papers which address a common issue critical to the college age as well as a common writing problems. Modeling for students, through a discussion on shared life concerns can be a powerful instructional strategy for encouraging higher level thinking.

Good writing is often equated with good thinking and the developmentalist who has done the most work on the cognitive strategies of college level students is William Perry.
Perry's schema of the intellectual and ethical growth of college students invites teachers to consider carefully the intellectual journies of students as they travel from a dualistic world of right and wrong, black and white, through the murky land of relativism in considering several points of view , toward the world of Committment In Relativism. Perry's work has been adapted by composition teachers who see the close link between writing and thinking. Tom Newkirk in his essay, "Why Bother With William Perry" suggests that sometimes this equation between writing and thinking skills breaks down. " There are times," he writes, when good thinking produces honest disorder, healthy confusion, when the student must or should opt for contradition at the expense of cohesion."("Why Bother With William Perry," p. 1) We bother with William Perry's schema of how students develop in intellectual skills because he helps us see what context of a writing course really does in addition to honing students' writing skills :it also challenges the students to think about their own thinking process.

Recently Patricia Bizzell in College English ("William Perry and Liberal Education," Vol. 46, Nu. 5, Sept. 1984) has reminded compostion teachers using Perry's model that many of the assumptions Perry makes about the aims of education are closely culture-bound and that it is quite possible for a normal college student to pass through his world without undergoing the kind of intellectual development Perry suggests. What Perry's frame allows us is not so much a rigid schema for classifying student-writing but a model for teachers to examine their own thinking about the goal of education. In addition to being "culture-bound" Perry's study was centered on an all- male Harvard student population. The idea that intellectual development could be shaped in different ways for males and females is a

research pursuit not as yet undertaken.

Using Perry's questioning frame, I asked Debbie and Steve what stood out for them during their Freshman years. Their responses reveal quite different descriptions of their "educations."

Steve , who was a beginning engineering student, said that his attitude about education is; "You have to want it. If you don't hunger for knowledge, then don't waste your time or money. " Many students," he related, "believe they learn for grades. I think that misrepresents what education should be. I've made a commitment with myself to put school before everything. I've had to sacrifice so much for this, much more than I could ever express in words." Judged on Perry's schema, Steve could be considered to be at the beginning of initial committment where he has rejected grades as the authority, where he sees his own need to sacrifice himself to his education and where he rejects the student whose learning isn't self-directed.

Yet Debbie's answer to what was important to her in her Freshman year did not include a focus on "knowledge" as did Steve's but on "relationships". She responded that "college helps people learn how to relate to one another. When I came to college I had this vision of college people as being more mature or more grown-up. I found it suprising to find the same sterotypes I had seen in high school. At first I was rather closed-minded. I vieved sorority girls as "airheads" and atheletes as "dumb-jocks" who were cheating their way through school, playing college sports. Learning to accept these types as people and being able to relate to them as people is a part of growing up and college is the beginning of that process."
Based on Perry's schema Debbie's response falls somewhat lower. While she is beginning to move away from dualistic thinking, from black and white categories of vieving people, there is no indication of commitment in her answer, no movement toward choice.

Obviously students cannot be scored on Perry's scale based on one interview or one paper. The point here is that Steve and Debbie's responses to the value of college to them are quite different ones, not that they are higher or lower on the scale. The work of both Perry and Erikson can help writing teacher to understand that both Steve and Debbie's papers, as well much of our students' writing, may relate to issues of personal and intellectual identity but in quite different ways.

I have found the research of Carol Gilligan and her colleague Nona Lyons to be very useful in examining some of the differences in writing voices and topic choices of male and female college students. Gilligan identifies the life-stage conflict for both men and women college students as the same---

that of a tension between "integrity and care" and she suggests that two perspectives on the conflict result in different life concerns. Gilligan writes; "From the different dynamics of separation and attachment in their gender identity formation through the divergence of identity and intimacy that marks their experience in adolescent years, male and female voices typically speak of the importance of different truths, the former of the role of separation as it defines and empovers the self, the latter of the ongoing process of attachment that creates and sustains the human community."(In A Different Voice, p. 156)

These differences in concerns are often revealed in students' writing.. For men, like Steve and many others there is a concern with the ethic of rights--of issues such as freedom vrs. non-freedom with ways of knowing and having reasons. For Debbie and other female students, the identity problem includes a sense of interconnection, of consciousness or an avareness andsensitivity to others which is revealed in her paper on her father as well as her reponses to the question of what was important in college to her.

An avareness and understanding of these differences caused me as a writing teacher to develop a different stance with respect to students' topic choice. During that semester when I taught Debbie and Steve I began to keep careful track of the kinds of topics my students were writing about : I found that females students wrote about relationships with others three times as often as men. I began to credit women students for the complexity and maturity of their topic choice in conjunction with their development of actual writing skills and techniques. As well, I solved a problem that had long bothered me. Male students always seemed to select mangageable topics to write about, topics that foresav closure whereas women would take on papers which had no possible closure such as papers about ongoing relationships and their writing therefore felt repetitive to me. I saw that the differences in developmental life issues for men and woman could in part explain the differences in topic choices. I no longer saw writing a paper about hunting, or hiking in the white mountains as a more difficult topic than getting along with one's roomates. An avareness of differences in writing voices offered me a new perspective for evaluating the topics of my female students, a frame which should make me a better listener, evaluator and reader of writing from women students. No longer did the abstractness of a topic---which was typical for my male students---translate into a more complex topic over those paper written by females which explored their relationships with others--most often with family members or close friends. For both students these issues of identity reppresented a struggle for a more complicated understanding of themselves and are equally difficult.

Finally my exposure to life-stage theories helped me shape some common class assignments, assignments which could be related to research in this area but also would be valuable to students.

Nona Lyons' research suggests that male and female students self-descriptions are very different---that men will describe themselves in terms that are separate and objective and that women's self-descriptions will be predominately in terms of "connectedness". While Lyons scored her protocols from taped descriptions, I had my students describe themselves to themselves in writing without reference to any male/female clues in the text. As a class we scored the protocols to see if we could determine differences in our writing voices. A protocol which easily fell into Lyons neat categories was this response:

" I am overweight, of medium height and otherwise physically non-descript. My personality is a combination of many feelings. I readily admit that I mask myself in society. I want to make everyone I know like me best of all people. I never succeed. I don't really know what I'm like."

We scored this correctly as a female voice but sometimes we were wrong as in this protocol:

"There is a way of describing myself now that is different than when I first arrived on campus. I am more independent in that I manage my finances and come and go when I want. I found I could survive without depending upon my parents .

I'm talkative and outgoing because you need to have freinds but I'm less concerned about keeping my friends happy Less sure of myself at times, I never experienced depressions until I lived at college. College has opened my eyes and I realize things aren't perfect once you reach 20."

We coded this according to Lyons as a male protocol, showing that the student didn't see needing people under an ethic of care but more under a concept of reciprocity. Further the lack of concern about keeping friends happy seemed to indicate that relationships involved "fairness" and that a rule could be invoked to solve the issue of responsibility to one's friends. The protocol tuned out to be from a female.

The assignment was used mainly to discuss psychological versus physical descriptions in writing and to address the issue of voices. The class moved from feeling that there were no sex differences in writing toward becoming aware of some possibilities of differences which might be attributed to gender.

Using models of adult development helped in selecting and structuring peer workshops which addressed common life issues, and make me more aware of my role in reinforcing and responding to different student topics in writing. For when topic choice is open, I need to understand that gender-related issues often guide the kinds of choices students select. Linda Peterson from Yale presented her research which showed the difference in performance of males and females on personal experience writing. Peterson

was u
writer-epared for her results which shoved that her women
writin id signficantly better with this type of writing. If a
studen lassroom includes too many assignments which require the
male s o use only personal experiences to write about, clearly
Carol ents are being shortchanged. (Peterson, CCCC paper, 1986)
of our Gilligan varns that we should hear the different voices
women' students: "The failure to see the different reality of
in par ives and to hear the differences in their voices stems
experi rom the assumption that there is a single mode of social
ve arr e and interpretation. By positing two different modes,
sees t at a more complex rendition of human experience which
and me truth of separation and attachment in the lives of women
modes nd recognizes how these truths are carried by different
language and thought." (In A Different Voice, pp. 173-74).

I
altoge also worried about those voices that are lost to us
stake r because teachers are unvare of the critical issues at
theore r college students' lives; ve are unfamiliar with
sudent al models of adult grovth which could help us guide
them. n finding topics to write about that are meaningful to
compre nally, as composition teachers ve have not yet begun to
studen d or accept the gender differences we find in our
writing.

My
where olleague at UNH Meg Peterson questioned," Lost voices,
all. they go?" As a writing teacher I'd like to find them